

Book Reviews

Gordon Donaldson, *The Faith of the Scots*.

Batsford, London, 1990. Pp. 160. £15.95.

Studies of the history of Scottish Christianity have tended to focus on ecclesiastical politics, theological controversies or Church responses to social problems. There has been an understandable interest in the dramatic episodes in Scottish Church history—the struggles between Church and State, the heresy trials and martyrs, the wars of the Covenants, the Church's efforts to reach the industrial working classes. Few studies, however, have explored the piety and beliefs commonly held by Christians in Scotland's past.

In this book Gordon Donaldson, Historiographer Royal in Scotland and former Professor of Scottish History and Palaeography at the University of Edinburgh, surveys the history of the Christian Faith in Scotland. His aim is to determine what "ordinary" Scottish Christians believed, and how successful the Scottish Church was in conveying the essentials of Christianity to the Scottish people. The task, he admits, is a difficult one. "Ordinary" men and women do not tend to record their religious beliefs, doubts and fears for posterity. Human motivations, moreover, are so complex that it is a dubious business at best to infer beliefs from such actions as attendance at church, the baptism of a child or the signing of a National Covenant. Any exploration of popular piety and beliefs must be tentative. Nonetheless, Professor Donaldson has drawn upon the ripe fruit of a lifetime of research and reflection, and the results are often illuminating.

The book is organised into eight chapters, which carry the story chronologically from the period of the conversions up to the present. Well-organised and clearly presented, the chapters investigate forms of worship, patterns of belief, types of piety, and the use of drama, music, painting and sculpture for religious purposes. The book is concerned primarily with the continuities in Scotland's Christian past. This is not to say there have been no discontinuities, and the Reformation in particular is portrayed as a fundamental transformation of the Faith. But historians, he suggests, have given too much attention to the strife of ecclesiastical politics, and not enough to continuities in Christian life and worship.

Much of the book is concerned with demolishing myths and misconceptions, such as the view that the Scottish Reformation was especially violent or that Scots were obsessed with witch-hunts. He also seeks to revise our views of some of the heroes and martyrs of the past, most notably those who suffered in the effort to achieve

the “godly commonwealth” in Scotland. Professor Donaldson in fact sees little good emerging out of attempts to achieve a “godly commonwealth” or to impose systems of Christian belief on people. He tends to regard “ecclesiastical politics” as a distraction from the pastoral work of the Church or the exemplary practice of Christian living. While respecting the sacrifices of seventeenth-century Covenanters, eighteenth-century Seceders, or those who went out at the Disruption of 1843, their impact, he argues, was largely negative. Faith, he suggests, cannot be made a corporate affair of the nation, but is rather private and voluntary, a matter of individual conscience. His belief in Christian individualism becomes especially evident in the final chapter of the book, which is strongly critical of those in the Church who advocate radical social change or seek to identify the Church with the struggle for social justice, whether in Scotland or abroad.

A pioneering study, the book deserves considerable credit, not least for its effort to direct the attention of historians of the Scottish Church to the questions of popular piety and beliefs. There are, to be sure, problems with a broad survey of this kind. While the earlier chapters reflect Professor Donaldson’s considerable expertise, his footing seems less sure when he moves into the modern period. His obvious discomfort with the conception of a working class hampers his analysis of popular religion in the industrial era. There is no discussion of the connection of Evangelical religion and political Liberalism in the nineteenth century, and no consideration of the effects of the Christian social progressives of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The massive nineteenth-century immigration of Irish Catholics is largely ignored. The discussion of faith in twentieth-century Scotland is more a bitter polemic against religious liberals and the political left than a historical analysis. Despite these weaknesses, this is a significant survey, which should encourage further work on Scottish popular piety and beliefs. We must be grateful to Professor Donaldson for continuing to instruct, provoke and entertain, and for having done so much to enlighten us on the history of Christianity in Scotland.

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John Edward McGoldrick, *Luther’s Scottish Connection*.

Fairleigh Dickson University Press, London and Toronto, 1989. Pp. 123. £19.95.

In the preface to this little book the author sets out his limited objective, namely, “to bring together in one place information that